

Student Supports at Proyecto Vimenti

By Robin Lake and Silene Vargas Díaz

vimenti
[espacio
para el
desarrollo]

by Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico



ABSTRACT:

Proyecto Vimenti, Puerto Rico’s first public charter school, was founded to change the trajectory of students and families in one of the island’s most economically depressed and isolated communities. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (BGCPR) has been serving young people inside the Ramos Antonini Public Housing project for 50 years—operating an afterschool program focusing on education, health, life skills, leadership development, and arts. They serve 350 children and youth annually.

After decades of work with local youth, BGCPR leaders realized that the community’s families were locked into intergenerational cycles of poverty that made it nearly impossible for the young people they served to achieve upward mobility. They became convinced that they had to take a radically different approach implementing a two-generation model that includes opening a school and related services as interlocking pieces that would tackle education and poverty and provide opportunity for young and their families.

Vimenti is authorized and overseen by Puerto Rico’s Department of Education under Act 85, the education reform bill passed in March 2018 as an Alliance (charter) School. This is one of three papers documenting lessons about finance and operations, professional development, and student support from the first year and a half of Proyecto Vimenti’s start-up phase. The goal is to inform the next phase of work and to help other Puerto Ricans consider the implications for other Alliance- and Department of Education-run public schools. The authors conducted structured interviews with more than 20 members of the Vimenti community, including parents, teachers, administrators, board members, consultants, funders, and officials from the Puerto Rico Department of Education.

“ We believe child poverty is not a disease. It is a condition in which a parent cannot earn enough to raise their child properly. . . The family is the essential unit. Nothing happens in isolation. Each of the [Proyecto Vimenti] components is meant to address an important piece. Each complements the other. Every action has a reaction. So the social component is the glue. It is the most significant part.

– Eduardo Carrera, CEO, Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico



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Proyecto Vimenti’s target population is children living in the Ernesto Ramos Antonini public housing complex in the community of Villa Prades, which surrounds the Vimenti school site. Ramos is considered one of the most dangerous housing complexes and has one of the highest poverty rates. It is the oldest public residential neighborhood in Puerto Rico—four generations of families live inside Ramos.

- Ninety-eight percent of the children in the community live below the poverty level.
- Sixty-seven percent of the families have a household annual income below \$5,000.
- Forty-two percent struggle with unemployment, compared to 6.3 percent in San Juan, 8.8 percent in Puerto Rico, and 3.6 percent in the United States.

Nearly five years ago, when the Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (BGCPR) saw the data from the Youth Development Institute (a sister organization of BGCPR that collects statistics on child poverty in Puerto Rico), they asked themselves: After providing services to these communities for 50 years, what could we transform or innovate to really change the conditions? BGCPR had a history of successes guiding participants to graduate from high school, many of whom are now in college, but they still live in poverty.



BGCPR researched plausible models that address the generational cycle of poverty and how to break out of it. When they found no local models, they decided to create their own.

“ We take an inventory of the family’s talents and gaps and work with them to address them,”

BGCPR CEO Eduardo Carrera said.

This paper focuses on a set of questions associated with the population of students Vimenti serves:

- What assets and challenges does this unique student population and their families bring?
- What are the unique goals and strategies—for example, attacking intergenerational poverty?
- How is the school tracking and reporting academic and nonacademic outcomes?
- How are data and experience informing shifts in the school’s strategy?
- What other early indicators might be useful to track?
- What challenges might lie ahead in measuring student achievement and social-emotional growth?

A Wide Range of Assets and Challenges

Emanuela (Emi) Aquafredda from the Children’s Health Fund”, an organization supporting health and wellness at Vimenti, explained the depth of complex needs they see at the school: “People are more aware of the challenges in Puerto Rico because of Hurricane Maria, but they have always been there. The Hurricane just compounded them.”

Bárbara Rivera, Vimenti’s director, explained that the families they serve have basic needs: having access to food, social-emotional needs such as anxiety and stress, and problems with communication and interaction. Rivera commonly sees these needs in students with violence in the home. On the other hand, the school also has many families with a desire to overcome their circumstances. Carrera said the BGCPR founding team realized early through interviews with families that “the desire for a good education was the same in these families as in my family. They have the same aspirations as we do. They really want the best opportunities. Everyone is aligned around that. It is very important.”

Each family has different contexts and “traps,” as Rivera called them. For example: A teenager who became pregnant, didn’t finish high school, and perhaps didn’t have all the preparation to be a mother has a problem because she has no job and no prospects for mobility, including no car. Those traps do not let them progress, and part of what Vimenti does, Rivera says, is look at what those situations are and help move them out:

“ So, in the first year we saw situations as a result of the conditions in which [families] live, but there was also much appetite, wanting a quality education for their children, wanting to participate in the employability program, getting a job. The myth that people who live in [low-income] communities do not want to get ahead or are living in a welfare way, I really didn’t feel it in this group. All the way around, it was: ‘I had not had a chance now I have it, I will grab it and I will walk with it.’ So far I have not seen anyone who does not really want to be linked in any way, the appetite is there.”

What Vimenti experienced when it opened its doors in August 2018 matched their research, but still surprised them. The typical profile of a Vimenti family: single mothers (46 percent), families in poverty (87 percent), unemployed (42 percent),

and limited education (39 percent high school graduates, 11 percent not completed high school). Children served at the school experience ongoing trauma, including violence, food insecurity, illness, deprivation, and natural disaster (hurricane). Nearly a third qualified for special education. Basic health screenings at the school revealed that 50 percent of students have vision problems, 15 percent have hearing problems, 27 percent have asthma, and 43 percent have oral health problems.

Unique Goals and Strategies

Vimenti operates with a clear and compelling hypothesis: To break the cycle of poverty they must educate and give opportunities in social, education, and economic areas for both children and their parents.

They looked at models abroad and met with think tanks and research centers dedicated to addressing poverty, such as the Aspen Institute and Ascend, and settled on a two-generation model that had been “studied and evidenced.”² The basic idea is if educational, economic, socio-emotional development, and networking services are all provided to the child and the family at the same time, their poverty conditions will change.

What makes Vimenti different, Rivera believes, is that,

“ Our school does not enroll a child, our school enrolls the family. We understand that the child does not live in poverty because he is poor, he lives in poverty because his family lives in poverty. If I really want to change the conditions and break that cycle, we may break it with that child as an adult, but we can start right now, by approaching the family. We provide an education of excellence that we understand every child deserves, making sure to meet their needs with a curriculum based on differentiated education that corresponds to the needs of the child and at the same time working with the family as an important component in the child’s educational development.”

Vimenti is a one-stop shop—families receive all the needed services in one place. One of the project’s case managers explained that, “Unlike the other public schools, this is a space where whoever is enrolled and their family will find everything, from

a social intervention by the case management area to a quality education and resources that [Vimenti] has made accessible to them. . . . There is no cost and they are receiving an education as if it were an education from a private school but in a public school that they don’t have to pay absolutely anything.”

In the multigenerational **education pillar**, children receive a high-quality education. Vimenti hopes to create the same educational opportunities for their students as more advantaged students have: an academic curriculum but also enrichment opportunities, such as entrepreneurship, art, and extracurricular activities. At the same time, parents receive education through the employability program, career counseling. If they have not finished their studies, Vimenti helps them complete high school or continue post-secondary studies.

Once the family is admitted to the school, Vimenti begins an extensive interview process, collecting sociodemographic data, family composition, and identifying family patterns to assess. One of Vimenti’s case managers explained why it is important for the school to collect this information:

“ [They] families are part of a system that often moves them to welfare, and if we want to break the generational cycle of poverty we have to get them out of that cycle. It is a process of breaking paradigms and building paradigms so they feel capable of doing things on their own. Once they can do something that may be the simplest thing, they feel empowered and then a world of

opportunities and possibilities opens up for them, because they feel capable of doing things that for a long time, be it the system, or the family, or the neighbors, or anyone else told them they couldn’t.

In the **socio-emotional pillar**, case managers work on plans with the family and with the students, then work socio-emotional skills and integration into the curriculum. And as a unique aspect, health and wellness assessments and services are fully integrated into the school. All students are screened, via the school’s Healthy and Ready to Learn program, for vision, hearing, hunger, and asthma. In the first year, the school found that almost 50 percent of students needed glasses.

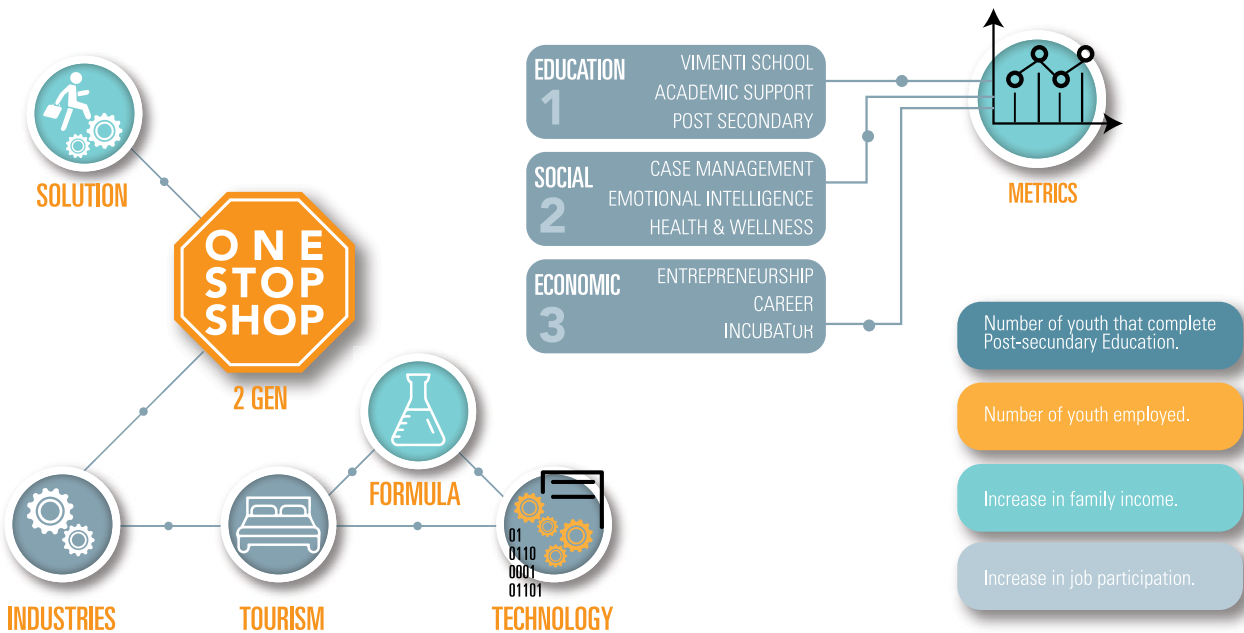
One mother explained how the services function for both students and families:

“ The children have a nurse who, if something happens to the child, a fever or a fall, they have the nurse, they have a pediatrician, a pediatrician who comes to evaluate them. If we, as mothers, have any concerns, we communicate it, they also have a psychologist, I have needed it and I have benefited from the psychologist, it is good.

Having the services delivered at school is a relief to families—many of whom struggle to find transportation—and helps sustain attendance, as one mother explained:

“ Before, my baby had constant weekly appointments I had to get him out of here and take him [to therapy sessions] ...it was too much. Here, thank God, they are giving therapies and he does not miss classes.”

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



1 “Our Mission,” Children’s Health Fund website, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.childrenshealthfund.org/our-mission/>.

2 Joan Lombardi et al., Gateways to Two Generations: The Potential for Early Childhood Programs and Partnerships to Support Children and Parents Together (Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, 2014), https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Gateways_paper_May2014.pdf.

Children's Health Fund

Karen Redlener, Executive Vice President and Co-Founder of the New York City-based Children's Health Fund, got connected to BGCPR CEO Eduardo Carrera through her husband, who was coordinating humanitarian relief to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. Her organization's Healthy and Ready to Learn initiative was working to connect elementary schools with health resources. The idea was to address medical conditions—such as vision, asthma, mental health, dental, hearing and hunger—that interfered with learning, and to address trauma and attendance in high-poverty schools.

Redlener's husband mentioned the initiative to Carrera, and the lightbulb went off that health and wellness should be incorporated into the Vimenti model.

The design team built health and wellness screenings into the Vimenti design, implementing them into the school's first year. The Children's Health Fund began to help address mental health in February 2019, focusing on trauma-informed instructional practices and strategies to increase attendance.

Redlener explained that Vimenti is similar to New York City's community school model, where afterschool or summer resources are available to students, but she said Proyecto Vimenti is like a "community school on steroids" because they include economic training for families.

"All of us working in the field of poverty," Redlener says, "we can't move the needle without cross-sector collaboration."

In the **economic pillar**, Vimenti provides tools for economic development for adults and young children. Participants develop awareness and appreciation for work and create aspirations for their lives beyond a career. "We want to create in them a sense of the future," Rivera explained, "with a curriculum from the age of six to adult programs where they are trained to have a career, get a job, and maintain it."

Students and adults alike are taught computer management skills and learn English. The project's Health and Wellness coordinator, Melany López, noted that this is an intentional strategy: "We are educating our children but we are also educating our parents in that area, so they can reinforce what the children are learning in school."

Adults in the community come to Vimenti to receive services even if their children do not attend. Vimenti hopes these adults come to realize that this is the way to transform both children's and adults'

opportunities in their community. One mother we interviewed explained why she believes Vimenti offers a unique service beyond just schooling:

"It's a growth opportunity for parents too, and not everyone has that. Not only do they attend to children, they also give courses, training for adults so that one as a parent can provide the help that our children need."

Another mother gave a poignant example of how the interacting pillars have made a difference for her family:

"I was in one of the employability workshops and that was a great experience because at first when I started working, my daughter had certain behavior problems because I did not have time with her, and because [Vimenti] did their best and worked with a psychologist and all that, and now she has an excellent academic performance, I feel extremely proud of her evolution."

Parents are aware that the services offered are meant to help their child in the long run. Said one parent:

"I am working thanks to [Vimenti]. . . . They give you the opportunity to take computer classes, conversational English, and not so much for us but also for the kids."

More than a year in, families have developed a foundational level of trust and a relationship with the Vimenti staff—largely because they are known and have services designed specifically for their needs. Across all pillars, integration and individualization are key to the model. As Wilfredo Damiani, director of the Social Pillar explained,

"Personalized, individualized service, I think that stands out, each family has a plan, direction, follow-up, I think that's one of the most important features."

The hope is that the summative experience of all three pillars will lead to global citizens who can compete with children who have the best educational opportunities in Puerto Rico, and who will have the same level of skills and opportunities in the future.

A case manager at Vimenti explained what she thinks makes the model work:

"It is not a superficial intervention, it is a deep intervention that generates a deep relationship with the family, I think that has been key. They have given us the opportunity to become part of their family, we are a source of support for many of them, they call us when there are events of violence in the community, they call us and tell what is happening, requesting help, when they have a crisis the first person they turn to is a team person, so we are already positioned in their life as a source of real support and it's still a long road but what we are doing we are doing well so far."



Measuring, Tracking, Reporting, and Adapting to Student Outcomes

After three years of operation, BGCPR and Vimenti hope to have enough data to determine if their model really works. They will look at whether their students are as competitive as their peers and how the families are doing. They know the project will take longer than three years for its full effect to be felt; it is a long-term strategy. But they want their outcomes to be evidence-based, and to keep repeating the model until they can show that this recipe is the one that can truly address the conditions of poverty.

Vimenti creates action plans for each family at the beginning of the year with annual goals and assessments, including housing, transportation, education, and employment. “The social area is the force that moves everything else,” Rivera explained. “From there everything else—education, employment, and all other services that the family needs—is born.”

The long-term outcomes are tracked as evidence of success. In the first year, for example, almost 50 percent of the parents who participated in the employability program were parents of children enrolled at the school. Since its opening Vimenti has graduated 91 adults from the employability program; 77 percent are already in the workforce.

Vimenti evaluates and categorizes all adults in the families they serve, determining if they are vulnerable, moderate, or stable. The goal is to lead them to stability and improve their economic and social conditions. The school started with a very high percentage of vulnerable families, about 36 percent; at the end of the school year only 9 percent were still in that category, the rest having moved into moderate or stable conditions (see graphic

below). Not all of these changes can be attributed to Vimenti’s interventions, but they are notable and deserve celebration and further study.

A Vimenti case manager told us about one family that arrived “totally vulnerable and bottoming out in many aspects of their lives” but had stabilized significantly since starting at the school. The mother had started university but had to leave before graduating. Vimenti helped her start building small successes, identifying her strengths, establishing paternity with the father of one of her children, participating in the employability program, and now training for a career in the tourism industry where she has a high likelihood of finding a job.

About 80 percent of families currently participate in the social and economic programs. While Vimenti staff would prefer 100 percent participation, they respect that each family has to develop the trust and respect to open up. The goal is to keep focusing on strengths and motivation in the hope that families will engage when they are ready.

As for the students, Vimenti uses a range of assessments to track academic progress, measure progress, and determine what supports they require. The school works hard to maintain consistency on the assessment process so they can use the results to adjust and differentiate instruction. This is a challenging task because teachers can have 17 students and think that the group is small, but the diversity of need is great. However, the strategy is showing positive early results.

Wilfredo Damiani, Social Area director, spoke about the academic growth the school accomplished in the first year:

“Our kindergarten students started with a 28 percent mastery in the basic subjects and finished with 46 percent in May, and although it is not our goal, because our goal is to have 70 percent mastery—but we are talking about a growth of 18 percentage points, a quite significant growth despite the needs of each of our students. [First grade children] started with a 54 percent mastery of the subjects and ended with 83 percent, so definitely the process that was executed, despite the difficulties, paid off.

Parents receive regular communication about their child’s progress, including four Parent-Teacher Conferences each year, which are meant to build trust with families. Report cards go out to parents in January and May and include a written account on how their child is doing. Rather than grades, the school reports on whether or not the child has mastered the expected skills for the grade level. An annual parent assembly and other activities connect parents to the school and to their child’s achievement.

One mother told us that when her daughter was in kindergarten at another school she “learned almost nothing,” and teachers wouldn’t talk to her unless

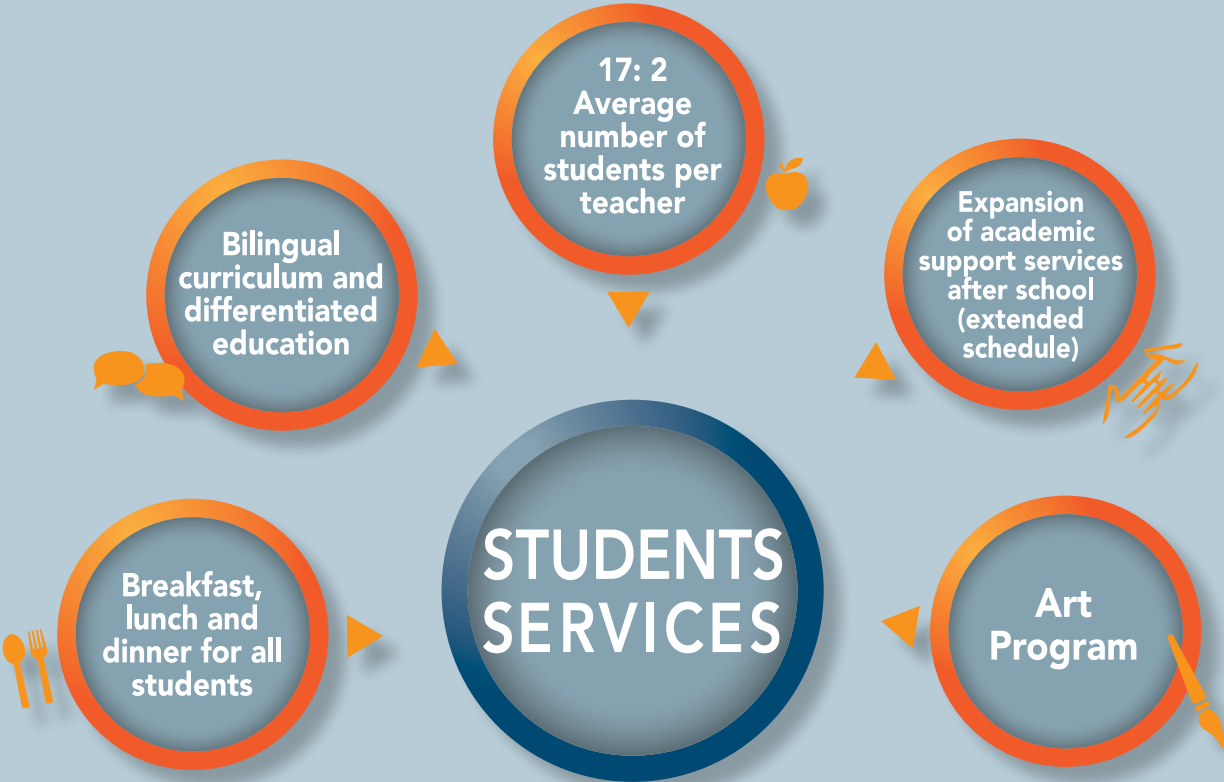
she had an appointment. At Vimenti she says she is welcome to visit and observe anytime and teachers take the time to discuss progress.

“They call us for any reason, however small, they have constant communication and I love it. Also with respect to the grades, in the end all they said [at the other school] was, ‘Look, he has an F.’ But not here. Here they tell you, ‘Let’s deal with this.’ I like the communication.” Another described highly detailed teacher-parent communication: “Any little thing that they see in the student, that they have been able to achieve or every detail, they let you know what happens on each student’s day.

As a publicly funded and overseen Alliance charter school, Vimenti is held accountable for academic results. However, Puerto Rico’s Secretary of Education, Eligio Hernández Pérez, says qualitative data from students and families is also extremely important to him. On one visit to the school, Secretary Hernández Pérez was impressed to speak to a father who said he had enrolled his child at the school because it was close to his home, but did not realize the school would transform his family by helping his wife enroll in university. The Secretary also spoke to children who reported changing their eating habits, getting visits by their teacher at home, and loving school so much they want to attend on weekends and holidays.

LEVELS OF FAMILY INTERVENTION

		August 2018	May 2019
Vulnerable	Families with intrafamilial situations and low level of poverty that prevents physical and emotional security.	36%	9%
Moderate or intermediate state	Stable families intrafamilial but with economic problems or families moderately stable in the economic area but with intrafamilial problems.	41%	65%
Stable	Stable families intrafamilial and with moderate or good economic stability.	23%	26%



Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

Tracking student success: Testing a model like Proyecto Vimenti is a challenge in itself. Finding reliable measures of progress on social-emotional skills, mental health, and other factors is difficult. The Vimenti board and leadership team understand the almost limitless need in their community, but they also know they must be able to implement and test their model in order to continuously improve and to serve as a legitimate proof point for other schools and for public policy.

The board, most immediately, will look eagerly to the second graders’ test results (in the school’s third year of operation), which will be the first comparative look at how their students perform academically. They are hoping students do substantially better than their peers. They also want to see independent readers in second grade, on the assumption that if students are reading independently, they will do well. If they are ready to read in third grade, the school can really push them to begin thinking critically.

Special needs: About a third of Vimenti students are identified as having special needs. Whether or not they actually have a disability, or are suffering from the effects of trauma or malnourishment or other side effects of poverty is not certain, but regardless, they required more intensive supports than the school was prepared to provide. The Department of Education never offered any support or resources. They eventually assigned a Department teacher, and BGCPR brought in their own provider for therapies in school so families wouldn’t have to leave. This year, Vimenti has two teachers (one provided by the Department, one provided by BGCPR) plus behavioral support.

This lack of financial support from the Department of Education cannot continue. There must be a clear formula for a child’s share of special education funds to follow the child to Vimenti, and the school should be able to hire its own special education faculty if they are to be held accountable for results.

Parent integration: Despite the many happy parents we interviewed, Carrera believes the school has more work to do to

“move from the grateful stage to ‘We are all parties.’”

Last year Vimenti conducted a climate survey which showed that parents are very engaged but, Carrera said,

“Now we are working to help them understand how to hold us accountable.”

The school has started a parent counsel and continues to work to find ways to more fully engage families.

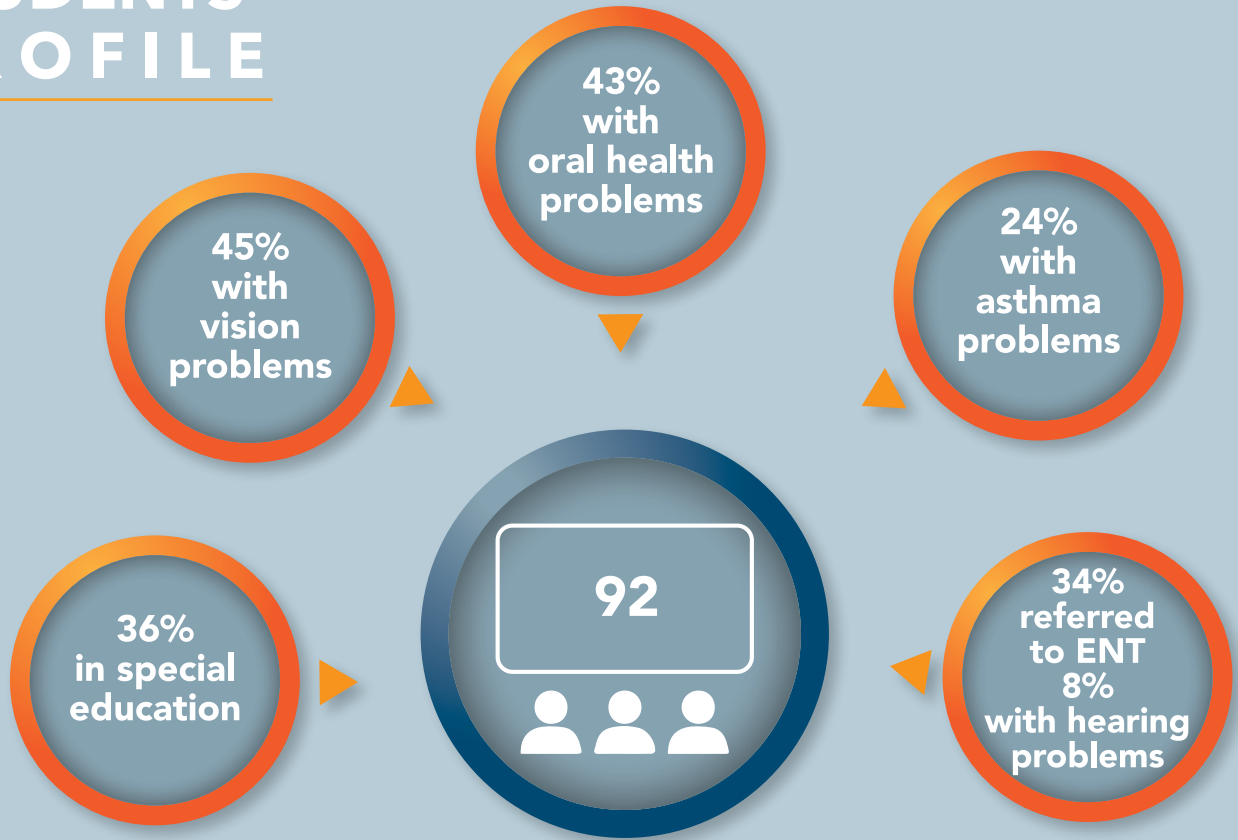
Integrating physical and mental health with academic supports: Vimenti’s hypothesis is that in-school services are essential to the academic success of children from low-income families. While further study is needed to assess the causal impact of Vimenti’s comprehensive approach, teachers and administrators—as well as parents—at the school all feel strongly that the ongoing interventions and tight family-school coordination is the correct approach for a school that serves so many students affected by poverty and trauma. Future research should attempt to isolate the impact of these interventions and analyze how they can be better integrated with academic interventions.

Conclusion: Solid Indicators of Progress, But Work Lies Ahead

There is no doubt that the community served by Proyecto Vimenti is profoundly affected by a complex and deeply embedded set of barriers and traps. One can see why Vimenti and BGCPR have come to believe that the school alone cannot overcome them. The experiment Vimenti represents is just taking hold and evidence is inconclusive. Early indicators on employment and economic stability are tantalizing, however, and reports from parents are compelling. But to serve as the proof point they hope to be, Vimenti must continue to systematically track progress and look for more rigorous ways to track early indicators, adjust course when needed, and then present compelling evidence on outcomes. Although the project is collecting all kinds of data, there is no external evaluator and no rigorous methodology to isolate the value the project adds. This would be yet another cost to the school, but it may be mission critical. As one mother pled,

“This school must be a model for public schools throughout Puerto Rico.”

STUDENTS’
PROFILE



Professional Development at Proyecto Vimenti

By Robin Lake and Silene Vargas Díaz

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“Professional development is very important because the work of a teacher is like the work of a doctor: if you studied education 15, 20, 25, 30 years ago and you stayed with what you learned at that time you are obsolete. Education is a field where research is ongoing, there are new findings, there are new methods, and the teacher has to learn constantly and reflect on his/her practice, and look at new research because the education that we have today it is not the same education of so many years ago.

- Vimenti teacher



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The Vimenti model requires teachers and staff to have a unique skill set. And a commitment to ongoing learning and improvement. This paper describes what lessons can be learned from Vimenti’s early experience recruiting and training educators for their model:

- What unique teaching skills were required for the model to work?
- How did Vimenti find and prepare their teachers?
- What barriers did they face in terms of the talent pool?
- What were the most effective mechanisms for helping teachers grasp the model and what would be required of them?
- What types of ongoing support were put in place and how did the supports evolve over time?
- What questions need to be asked in the future to help grow and sustain the talent pool for Puerto Rico’s charter schools?

Unique Skills Required
for the Model to Work

The founding team for Vimenti envisioned a school like none that existed in Puerto Rico—one that would permanently lift children and their families out of poverty. It would have the best of everything, including teachers. Students would have the same academic curriculum as students in elite private schools, and the same enrichment opportunities as children from other social levels have, such as entrepreneurship, art, and nurturing extracurricular activities. And their families would have educational, employment, and networking opportunities.

In the classroom, the vision was for high academic expectations, instruction geared to students’ unique academic needs, and a positive approach to behavior management. Teachers at this school would be expected to teach to the very highest levels with students and families with the very highest needs.

On top of the pedagogical skills required to teach at Vimenti, teachers would be working in a new and innovative organization that would regularly test and refine its model. The implications for teachers was intense. As Bárbara Rivera, director of Proyecto Vimenti, described,

“Vimenti teachers not only have to be excellent professionals, but they also “have to have heart and commitment.”

It would be difficult to find such talented and mission-aligned teachers in the mainland U.S., but Puerto Rico’s context made the challenge all the more daunting.

The average Puerto Rican teacher makes \$29,000 a year—and opportunities abound for bilingual teachers to double their salaries on the mainland. As a result, the island has seen a mass exodus of teachers. Districts on the mainland actively recruit and hire away some of Puerto Rico’s best talent. A shortage of teachers with English language skills exacerbates the problem. What’s more, the existing teaching corps’ training was dramatically different from what Vimenti had planned for the school. The founding team knew they would have to take extraordinary measures to find the extraordinary teachers they wanted.

Finding and Preparing Vimenti Teachers

Indeed, recruiting quality teachers was the school’s primary challenge in the first year.

To find the best possible teachers, Vimenti would pay more than any other Puerto Rican entry-level teachers made. A new Vimenti teacher makes \$40,000 a year—\$5,000 to \$6,000 more than teachers at any other Puerto Rican school, public or private. The hiring team looked for three qualities: experience at the K–3 level, an appetite to learn, and interest and commitment to the mission and approach of the project.

Interviews began in January 2018, seven months before the school was to open, and continued with many rounds of interviews over the next several months. Rivera described it as an exhaustive process:

“Honestly it was very difficult for us to get bilingual staff or get people who were aligned with our cause, our mission, and also that they understood the educational methodology that we were going to implement.”

There were few qualified applications for the teaching positions.

In the end, the work paid off and Vimenti ended up with what Rivera called an “extraordinary faculty” made up of both experienced and new teachers, some from Head Start, some from Saint John’s School or other private schools, and one who’d been with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (Vimenti’s parent organization).

Elizabeth Greninger, a consultant hired to align Vimenti’s curriculum and professional development, observed that Vimenti teachers were “really responsive, open, eager, and willing,” and that even the teaching assistants were very invested and bright. Having worked in traditional Puerto Rican schools previously, Greninger thought it was helpful that Vimenti teachers didn’t come from the traditional system, where she found teachers could be resistant to new approaches.

Helping Teachers Prepare for and Implement the Model

Despite the quality of their first hires, Vimenti knew their teachers would need many supports to be ready for the school year. The first two teachers, hired in March, job shadowed at Saint John’s School to familiarize themselves with the curriculum Vimenti wanted to replicate. Most of the rest started in June and trained all summer before the school opened. Their training included a strategic retreat to learn about the entire Vimenti project, as all three pillars of the project—academic, social, and economic—would launch at the same time. The training was delivered in themes: teachers learned about the background and strategy of the project, the reality of poverty, the basic curriculum and academic model, policies and procedures, and the distinct culture and norms of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico.

Teachers also had a chance to learn about their students’ academic and social-emotional needs. At the start of the school year in August 2018, Vimenti held a family retreat where teachers learned about their students’ backgrounds, including their academic, social, and health needs.

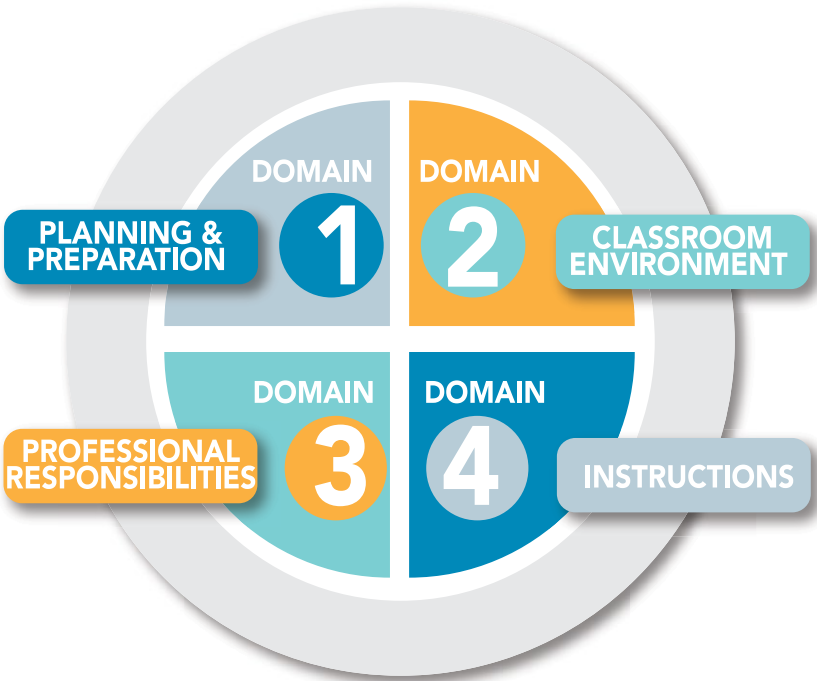
Notably, during this summer intensive teachers did not receive training in classroom management, schoolwide student behavior systems, or special education—all of which proved to be some of the greatest challenges they encountered in their first year.

Once school started, teachers had access to ongoing professional development to continue to deepen their understanding of the model. Initially, teachers had a designated half day of professional development each Friday, though in the first year they did not always get the entire planned time. During this time, teachers might analyze student data, work on positive behavior interventions, or problem solve with curriculum consultants. The school was implementing the Danielson Framework¹ and Danielson coaches regularly observed in

classrooms and provided specific feedback for how teachers could improve their instruction. Eventually, Vimenti added Saturday professional development sessions to give teachers additional support.

Vimenti’s principal and teachers also went on trips to New York and Washington, D.C., to see how other schools handled behavior and created classroom routines and schoolwide structures. Vimenti supported two teachers to receive their teacher certification from the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education² where they learned specific and focused strategies (Orton-Gillingham approach) for teaching literacy to students with diverse needs.

One Vimenti teacher told us that the amount of professional development teachers receive at the school is higher than she experienced at other schools—and what really distinguishes professional development at Vimenti is the consistency and follow up, for which she says there is “no comparison.” Much of that intensity of support is due to the external partners brought in to support teacher growth.



DANIELSON
FRAMEWORK

¹ “The Framework for Teaching,” the Danielson Group website, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://danielsongroup.org/framework>.
² “About Us,” Institute for Multi-Sensory Education website, accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.orton-gillingham.com/about-us/>.

Outside Expertise and Support

In the first year of operation, Vimenti teachers had access to a range of experts.

The Danielson Group, a nonprofit that has a well-regarded framework for teacher instruction, feedback, reflection, and adaptation, was a key consultant in the first year, visiting the school every six weeks. Lee Kappes, Director of Professional Learning and Program for the Danielson Group, helped Vimenti’s principal use the framework to observe, collect evidence, and provide objective feedback. She also worked with teachers and aides to deepen their understanding of the tool, instill practices of being an effective teacher, including classroom management and behaviors. Teachers felt the Danielson framework and related coaching were some of the best professional development they received in the first year because it was concrete and based on specific feedback from classroom observations. They felt they were able to develop a positive and thorough understanding of the framework, which will eventually be used to evaluate their performance. One teacher told us,

“Danielson has been very good for me because Danielson measures different aspects in the classroom and helps you think about everything, not only in one class at the time you are teaching, but when planning for each student.”

Elizabeth Greninger, a curriculum consultant, started working with Vimenti part way into the first year to help adapt the Saint John’s School curriculum to the unique needs of Vimenti’s students and to Puerto Rico’s standards and assessments. Greninger’s first report showed that Saint John’s curriculum would have to be significantly adapted to

meet student needs. In particular, most kindergarten instruction at Saint John’s was in English, but Vimenti students had little to no exposure to English and needed more Spanish instruction. Greninger also found that the curriculum, designed for more advantaged private school students, had to better align to Puerto Rico Department of Education standards and needed more cultural context so “kids from poverty could relate.” Greninger worked to help teachers break down and plan their lessons, not just take the curriculum off the shelf. In Vimenti’s second year, Greninger is helping the school align professional development to the curriculum.

While she is primarily focused on academics, Greninger says working with teachers at Vimenti inevitably involves more than that.

“Vimenti is educating the whole child—that is the hallmark of their work. The community-based model—health, safety, and academics together—is special.”

In practice, that means talking about classroom routines and social-emotional strategies, such as greetings, checking to see if students are ready to learn, and having parents understand how to support their child at home. Vimenti teachers, Greninger says, are given the freedom and blessing to address the full spectrum of their students’ needs. Teachers felt the training was excellent.



The Children’s Health Fund was involved in the design phase and began providing technical assistance in February 2018. Vimenti teachers were not getting any training in these practices and they were not emphasized in their evaluation framework, according to CHF staff. As a result, they were unable to de-escalate difficult behaviors, which led to burnout and turnover. One teacher told us,

“I had never worked with children who suffered this level of trauma; that is, I did not know what to expect, what to do.”

Teachers have so far appreciated the workshops about the impact of trauma on children’s brains and restorative behavior practices, but are also clear that they have not yet received the support they need to put those ideas into practice.

Saint John’s School’s head of school, Lorraine Lago, and elementary school principal, Maika Marchán, sit on Vimenti’s governing board and provided ongoing advising to teachers and the principal. Initially, the two helped with academics, and curriculum in particular, given that the Saint John curriculum was meant to be implemented wholesale. During start-up they helped hire teachers, assess students, and essentially created the same physical space as Saint John’s classrooms. Once it became apparent the curriculum would have to shift, they helped with that as well. Lago described why and how:

“The idea was that children would be immersed in the same experiences so they would get the same outcomes. But the background of students was very different.”

Lago and Marchán also helped Vimenti leaders from the Boys & Girls Clubs—who had never run a school—by explaining the little things they do at Saint John’s to support teachers. “In the corporate world,” Lago explained,

“they don’t do the touchy-feely aspect of [human resources]. Educators need that hug or a surprise lunch sometimes.”

Professional development at Vimenti, one consultant told me, tries to be responsive to teacher needs. A significant portion of professional development time has been devoted to understanding how to help teachers differentiate instruction to ensure that all students can master the standard they are asking them to do, regardless of where they are starting.



First Year Challenges

Despite all of these intensive efforts, it was impossible to fully prepare even more experienced teachers and administrators for the reality of teaching in a brand new school with a novel model, especially given that students’ needs and academic gaps—even in kindergarten—were more intense than anyone had anticipated or planned for. As one teacher described to us, “Well, the first challenge we face is that the children arrive with an academic and developmental lag, that is, a brutal lag.” Students, she explained, came to them not having the fine motor skills to hold a pencil, not knowing about letter sounds or shapes, or—for some—not even having seen books or lettering in their homes.

This “brutal lag” meant that the school had to not only dramatically adapt their planned curriculum, but teachers who had taught in a private school setting also had to significantly adapt their instructional approaches, especially to classroom management and differentiated instruction. Even though class sizes were kept small, at around 17 students per class, the diversity of need—both academic and social-emotional—was greater than most teachers had dealt with. One observer put it bluntly:

“Classroom management and the schoolwide approach to discipline approach didn’t work. Teachers hadn’t worked with that population... The school was unprepared for the learning behaviors and lack of self-control that students had. Part of the problem was that several teachers hadn’t been in that setting before, but there was a cultural aspect too: there was a high level of acceptance for some of the behavior. A much more trauma-impacted population of learners came up against a staff that was largely coming out of private school setting.”

An outgrowth of the struggles with classroom management was that Vimenti’s principal ended up having to prioritize her time on addressing discipline issues and couldn’t focus on supporting teaching and learning. The principal and educational director left the school after the end of the first year. On top of adapting curriculum and other start-up adjustments, managing change ended up being a constant in the school’s first year. Bárbara Rivera and other Vimenti

leaders worked to maintain staff coherence and to create a synergy of work with Vimenti’s mission and strategic vision. Rivera says they constantly helped everyone through the change by returning to the mission: eradicating child poverty, how that will be achieved, what the path is.

“Teachers’ workload and retention are directly related to the amount of trauma students experience,” one of Vimenti’s external partners noted.
“People who work in poor communities are used to struggling, but because of the shooting this year and other issues, Vimenti has had more than its share of start-up challenges.”

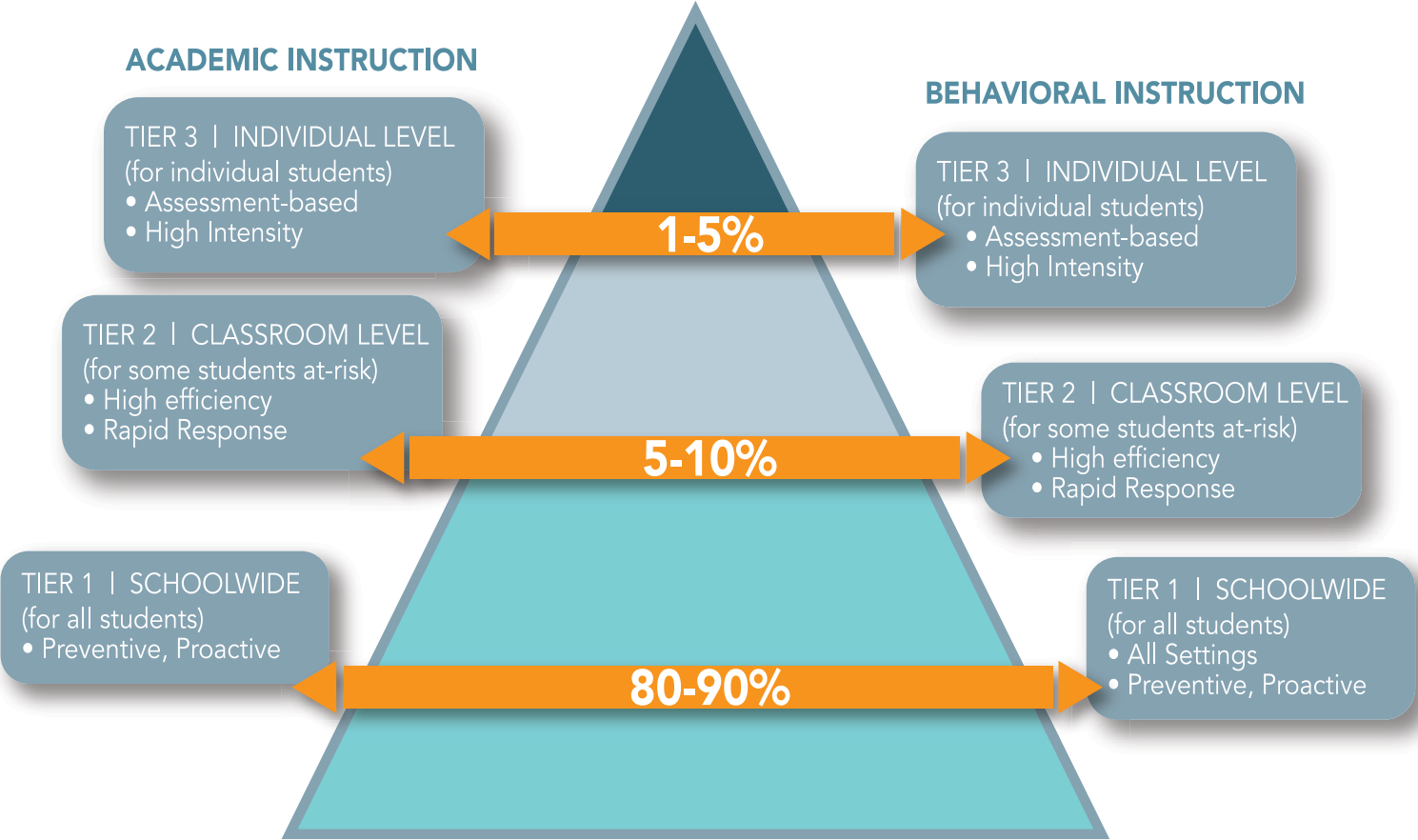
Teachers have received an increased level of support in classroom management and appropriate behavioral interventions for students, but much more is clearly needed and desired.

The school is also still figuring out how to use data to improve. A lot of emphasis is placed on assessment in early reading skills, but according to at least one observer, the school hasn’t yet figured out how to do that without too much emphasis on testing. They are working to embed assessments in the curriculum and reinforce it in professional development.

Special education is also not yet integrated into the rest of professional development, a concern given that nearly a third of Vimenti students qualify for special education supports. One of the more experienced teachers at Vimenti told us,

“I would love to have a little more knowledge about how to handle it in the classroom—the rules, what are my responsibilities as a teacher with these special education children?”

MULTI-TIERS



Reference: Designing Schoolwide Systems for Students Success



Lessons Learned

Focus on support and improvement. From all of our interviews, we heard consistently that Vimenti's early attention to hiring for openness and commitment to mission and then providing intensive professional supports paid off. Teachers had 90 minutes of planning time each day, a half-day block on Fridays, and a month over the summer. This is much more than most U.S. public schools, which typically provide only 45 minutes per day.³

By all accounts, teachers at Vimenti grew in cooperation and openness and appreciated supportive, not punitive, efforts to help them get better. Teachers are evaluated on performance but for the most part, the first year focused on growth and learning and on the values and responsibilities defined by the Danielson framework. (Most teachers are not yet "distinguished" in the Danielson framework, but they are not yet expected to be.)

Great talent is not enough. Even with experienced teachers, administrators realized they had to do much more planning, more intentionality, and more connecting the dots: student to teacher, teacher to teacher, and teacher to parent. For example, one of the reasons behavior management was so difficult during the first year was because there was no coordinated schoolwide plan. Teachers, administrators, social workers, and parents were not having conversations about student needs and strategies out of concern for student confidentiality.

Depth of student need. Another lesson learned was that despite having worked with the local community, the depth of student need wasn't fully apparent until well into the first year. This might have been identified earlier with more intensive intake assessments with families and students and better strategies for addressing those needs: creating tiered levels of behavior and intervention and clear plans for who would manage those interventions.

An ongoing concern is that, with such a complex model and intensive student need, teachers are overwhelmed and overloaded. By some reports, teachers are working nights and weekends and still do not have grade-level planning time. Vimenti recognizes the challenges of work in turning around underperforming schools. While there is goodwill now, that may eventually turn into bitterness. Vimenti must attend to its teachers' work-life balance.

The leadership team is aware of this challenge. Rivera

“ says she and the board are focused on how to balance the energy this project requires and “the emotional load it has.”
The school, Rivera says, seeks to have a positive climate not only for children but for the project team; they are working to maintain that climate so teachers want to be there, despite the size of the challenge.

Looking Forward

Proyecto Vimenti is currently focused on working through start-up challenges typical for most charter schools, but Eduardo Carrera, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Puerto Rico, is keenly aware that they also must plan for future challenges.

Talent acquisition, Carrera says, will be an ongoing problem. It was difficult and costly to put teachers on planes to see schools they wanted to emulate. Most new Puerto Rican teachers, he says, have not been exposed to high expectations. Dual-language teachers are especially hard to find. Vimenti, Carrera notes, cannot keep hiring from private schools. What's more, nearly half (14,000) of Puerto Rico's teachers are expected to retire in the next five years. Finding school leaders will be a problem, too. Vimenti has begun to look at moving successful teacher aides into teaching positions and may need to start its own training and recruitment program in the future.

Conclusion

Everyone seems to recognize the enormity of the challenge the Proyecto Vimenti project took on. The school is trying to hold to a very high academic standard because they see it as the only way out of poverty across Puerto Rican schools while dealing with an unexpectedly high number of children with severe needs. The fundamentals are in place and there is an ongoing commitment to improvement and to the school's mission, which teachers and consultants alike describe as special and important. One observer talked about the investment and excitement among teachers and administrators:

“ They have the right people to do the work. Everyone is making an investment collectively and individually. The habits and process foundations are being put in place. We just gotta work through [the challenges].”



³ Hannah Jarmolowski, "Teacher Planning and Collaboration Time" (blog), National Council on Teacher Quality, November 2017, <https://www.nctq.org/blog/November-2017:-Teacher-Planning-and-Collaboration-Time>.

Operations and Finance at Proyecto Vimenti

By Robin Lake and Silene Vargas Díaz

vimenti
[espacio
para el
desarrollo]

by Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico



ABSTRACT:

Proyecto Vimenti, Puerto Rico’s first public charter school, was founded to change the trajectory of students and families in one of the island’s most economically depressed and isolated communities. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (BGCPR) has been serving young people inside the Ramos Antonini Public Housing project for 50 years—operating an afterschool program focusing on education, health, life skills, leadership development, and arts. They serve 350 children and youth annually.

After decades of work with local youth, BGCPR leaders realized that the community’s families were locked into intergenerational cycles of poverty that made it nearly impossible for the young people they served to achieve upward mobility. They became convinced that they had to take a radically different approach implementing a two-generation model that includes opening a school and related services as interlocking pieces that would tackle education and poverty and provide opportunity for young people and their families.

Vimenti is authorized and overseen by Puerto Rico’s Department of Education under Act 85, the education reform bill passed in March 2018 as an Alliance (charter) School. This is one of three papers documenting lessons about finance and operations, professional development, and student support from the first year and a half of Proyecto Vimenti’s start-up phase. The goal is to inform the next phase of work and to help other Puerto Ricans consider the implications for other Alliance- and Department of Education-run public schools. The authors conducted structured interviews with more than 20 members of the Vimenti community, including parents, teachers, administrators, board members, consultants, funders, and officials from the Puerto Rico Department of Education.



By Robin Lake and Silene Vargas Díaz

Several years ago the leadership of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico (BGCPR) collectively sat down to take a hard look at the community’s youth. With 87 percent of the youth they served living in poverty, leadership realized that they were not adequately addressing the systemwide trappings of poverty and how hard it is to escape. They realized no single direct program would be enough and decided to make a significant investment in changing the trajectory of youth. Eduardo Carrera, BGCPR CEO, explained why he and others believed they had to fundamentally rethink their approach: “The more we worked on the issue, the more we understood the depth of need.” BGCPR spent two years studying and developing a unique program delivery model and decided to pilot it in the community they’d served for 50 years.

The idea was to create a school that would give children growing up in poverty the best possible educational opportunities. BGCPR wanted to address the underlying health and wellness barriers the children faced. And they believed they had to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by helping their families’ economic prospects. They researched models that work to break the cycle of poverty, identifying the “two-generation approach” from the Aspen Institute as a promising model.¹ They adopted the model and designed their service model based on three core areas: education,

social, and economic. The central hypothesis: The opportunity of high-caliber education for children would yield different results. The thought: Connect with the best they could find on each component.

“We believe child poverty is not a disease,” explained Carrera, “It is a condition in which a parent cannot earn enough to raise their child properly. This led us to increase our capacity to provide for children and break the cycle. The family is the essential unit. Nothing happens in isolation. Each of the components is meant to address an important piece. Each complements the other. Every action has a reaction. So the social component is the glue. It is the most significant part. We take an inventory of the family’s talents, and gaps, and work with them to address them.”

What did it take to open Puerto Rico’s first charter school? What capacities did the host organization bring? What lessons were learned in the process that might inform future charter openings in Puerto Rico? This paper explores the financial and operational lessons learned from the first year and a half of Proyecto Vimenti’s operation.



¹ Joan Lombardi et al., Gateways to Two Generations: The Potential for Early Childhood Programs and Partnerships to Support Children and Parents Together (Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, 2014), https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Gateways_paper_May2014.pdf.

Designing a Path Out of Poverty

Once the BGCPR board approved the plan, Carrera created a small design team with himself, Bárbara Rivera, who led the design work (and later became Vimenti’s director), Luz Nereida Arroyo, strategic director, and Eric Torres, a former Walmart finance and strategic business planning expert who led the finance and operations planning. The team toured high-performing schools, read, studied, and began to connect with local partners. The design team also drew heavily on the broader institutional knowledge and connections of BGCPR for specific design topics, including finance, strategic management, and human resources.

An early key partner was Saint John’s School, one of the island’s elite private prep schools. Saint John’s had approached BGCPR about scholarship opportunities, but the design team saw the greater opportunity in replicating Saint John’s program with its own future students. Lorraine Lago, Head of Saint John’s School, explained why they decided to partner:

“Eduardo approached us to tell about dream he had: opening a school in housing project. He said, ‘I want to model it after the best school in Puerto Rico.’”

For Saint John’s School, giving back to the community is an essential part of their mission and they already had some connections to the community. This process of partnership was presented and validated with the board of Saint John’s School. The main idea was to receive support in the academic and instructional experience of one of the best private schools in Puerto Rico.

However, the design process drew most heavily on the community. The team created three focus groups with students and families and used human-centered design² principles to learn what was most important to them. They asked young children (ages 6 and 7) to create a school for a superhero through play. The children acted out how children would be treated at their superhero schools—they wanted a school where students were treated with kindness and care. The design team also spoke to teens who were almost ready to leave school and asked them to reflect on their ideal elementary school.

Carrera said he realized in their interviews that the desire for a good education was the same in these families as in his family. “We have the same aspirations. They really want the best opportunities.” The design team, he said, took care to ensure everyone is aligned around those aspirations: “It is very important.” However, it also became clear that

parents were defining quality in terms of whether a school had air conditioning, not academics. As Carrera noted,

“They didn’t know kids were not learning at the schools they thought were high quality.”

The team visited local families to identify education- or literacy-related artifacts in the home. One house they visited had no written material at all, not even a magazine.

The design team learned through these conversations and observations that food was more important to these families than nutrition. Food was a way to connect, to learn about culture, and was an essential nutritional reality. They decided to hire a chef at the school and serve breakfast to all the families. They also learned about the importance of treating families with respect. One mother told Carrera,

“Listen, I have two jobs and I have to travel hours to get to them. The last thing I need is for the school to call me in and have me sit in the hardest chair there.”

Carrera told us he believed this mother wasn’t just talking about the chair. She was telling them how hard she works and wanted to have that acknowledged. “She wanted someone to see her,” Carrera said. That led the team to prioritize case managers who work with families and put them at the center:

“We always have to be in alignment with that.”

As of January 2018, the plan was to open the school as a private, tuition-free school. The goal was always to bring more public funds to the community, but at that point, the law didn’t allow charter schools. The most important element for the design team was that the school would be able to operate differently than the highly centralized government schools that yield, on average, 30 to 40 percent academic proficiency.

The BGCPR planned to invest \$16 million in the project (including the school and related social and economic supports) for four years, and then have enough comparative data to show what was possible. In February 2018 the school was licensed to operate as a private school. In March 2018 the charter law passed. BGCPR told the community they would open the school whether it was public or private.

Budgeting for Complexity

While Carrera and Rivera were working through the vision, Eric Torres was putting numbers to it. He had known Carrera for 10 years through Walmart and a personal collaboration and supporting task within a strategic committee at the BGCPR organization.

“Sometimes in life the pieces are put together by destiny,” Torres said.

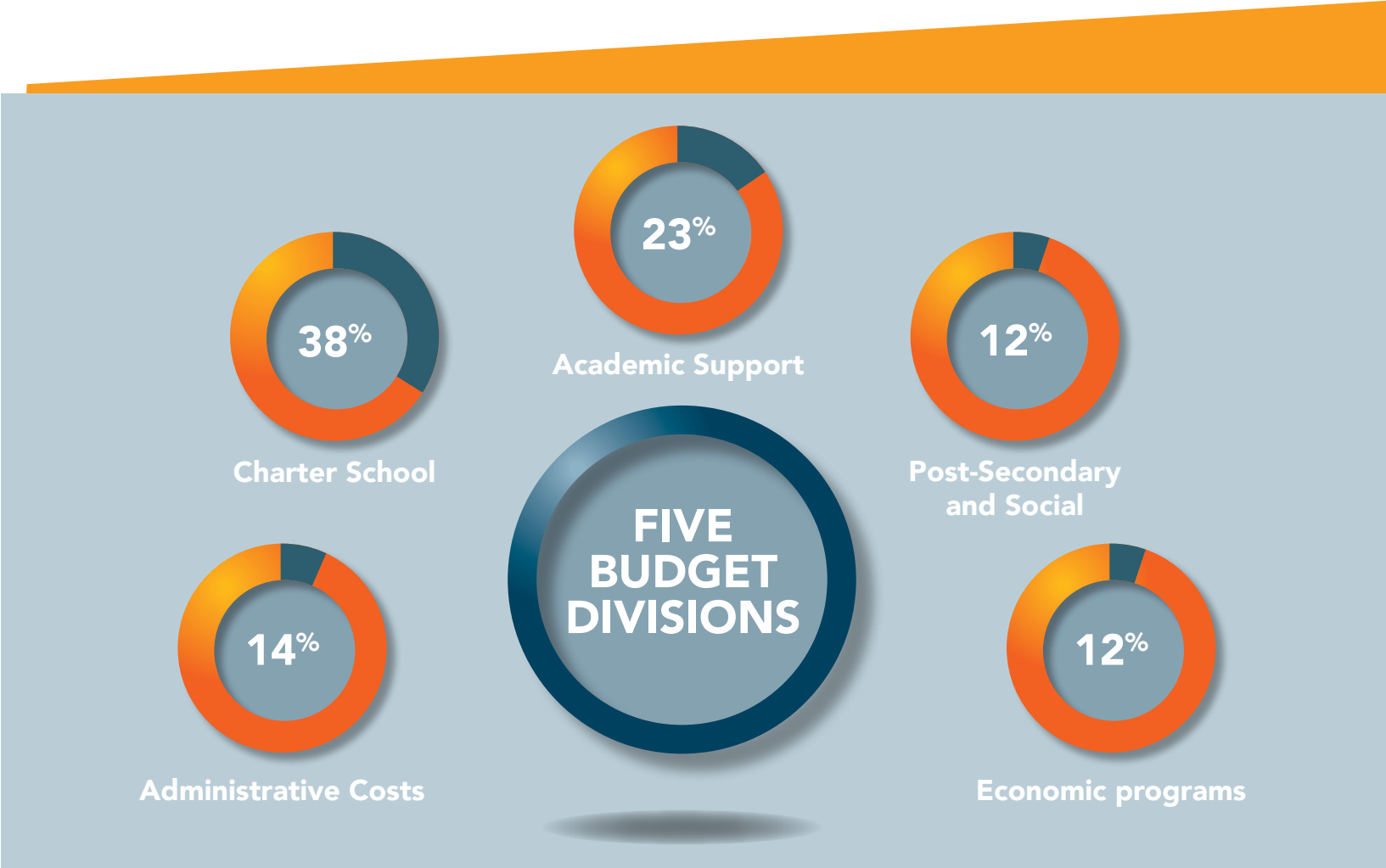
The team brainstormed for over a year before getting serious about budgets. Torres built out assumptions about how many teachers the school would need, and the costs of the building, security, maintenance, etc. Based on his extensive experience working on complex Walmart retail operation projects and more recently as a consultant of business development for investors and local companies, Torres insisted on creating “divisions” inside the broad project to ensure accurate budgets and accounting details of costs in different areas.

The five budget divisions consisted of:

- 1) Charter School (38%)
- 2) Academic Support (23%)
- 3) Post-Secondary and Social (12%)
- 4) Administrative Costs (14%)
- 5) Economic programs, such as career supports and entrepreneurship training (12%)

Torres also recognized that they had to think beyond just operations—the focus of most nonprofits. He built a budget that considered initial start-up investments, including but not limited to preopening expenses, wage assumptions and revenue forecasts, taxes, initial materials and supplies, depreciation schedules, and contingencies.

The total budget came to \$4 million for the first year (\$3 million in operating expenses and \$1 million in capital investment). Over a four-year period, the cost was expected to approach \$16 million for the entire project and \$7 million for the school. Critically, these budgets were built two to three years before the school opened, allowing them develop the financing and build well ahead of the actual opening. In the first year of operation the school’s total operating cost was \$1 million, or about \$16,000 per child. They expect to spend \$14,000 per child at full enrollment.



4 ² Wikipedia, “Human-centered design,” accessed January 24, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human-centered_design.

The Charter Process

In February 2018 the BGCPR team applied to open as a private school, just six months before it was slated to open and a month before Puerto Rico's education reform act was signed into law. The Department of Education's application process involved an application and panel interview. A decision would come in July—for an August opening.

Members of the founding team attended Department of Education meetings, asked questions, and put together the application. They hired teachers and recruited families in June. In July they learned the application process was delayed; they held a retreat and told families they would open with or without a charter. Finally, their charter was approved in early August and opened August 20, 2018, as Proyecto Vimenti.

According to Department of Education officials, Vimenti was uniquely qualified to be the only application they approved: they met the requirements of the application criteria and, most importantly, they knew the community they wanted to serve and had their support.

“If we hadn't worked for two years to prepare, it would have been difficult, if not impossible” to get approved and open successfully, said Carrera.

Being a charter school allowed Vimenti to access public funding, but they received only half of what they'd expected. The Department of Education initially said Vimenti would receive \$6,400 per child but after the application was approved, they learned it would be only \$3,200. The Department claimed this was better aligned with what other Puerto Rican public schools received. Because the Puerto Rican system is highly centralized, the Department of Education calculated the total expenditures per student and then subtracted the cost of other services offered from the central office, as well as regional educational offices' costs, which are assigned directly to the school from the central office. This is a strikingly low figure, however, especially compared to other per-pupil allocations on the mainland. A recent study of charter schools in 14 U.S. cities found that charter schools received an average of \$8,468 in state revenues and an average of nearly \$16,000 in combined federal, state, and local revenues.³

The charter school portion, then, amounts to about 50 percent of the total dollars spent on other public schools. This is unlike most mainland charter school laws, which only hold back a small percentage of state and federal funding for the purpose of oversight. Puerto Rico's Secretary of Education Eligio Hernández Pérez says that the Department will receive financial support from a local foundation to share the data behind their per-pupil cost calculation. Hernández Pérez says it is extremely important to them to have that third-party review. He notes that authorizing charter schools in Puerto Rico has resulted in a lot of learning and has

“required us to leave our comfort zone as an educational system.”

Unlike mainland U.S. charter schools, the Puerto Rican government did not provide start-up funding and did not provide any public funds until Vimenti had been in operation for eight months, in April or May of its first year of operation. The Department of Education provides funding based on reimbursements and reporting of expenses, not just on enrollment numbers.

All of this was complicated by significant turnover and confusion in the Department of Education when Secretary of Education Julia Keleher stepped down and was later arrested on corruption charges.⁴

Despite the fact that nearly a third of their students qualify for special education services, Vimenti has yet not received any Title I funds, though a special education teacher who works for the Department of Education was assigned to the school in the second year. The Department is aware of the obligation to provide funding for special education services, but federal funds are currently frozen because of alleged corruption. Vimenti is assuming for now that they must simply make up the difference between what the Department is providing and what the students need.

Carrera is clear that although public funding is important to the project, he also believes it is important to show what can be done under a government accountability model:

“Accountability is empowerment to make change. The problem is when multiple layers of decisions are an obstacle to quality. The flexibility of the charter allows us to make timely decisions. I think people can grasp that different interventions lead to different results. We want to be the specific case that people can point to.”

Vimenti is also committed to documenting and publishing the results of the school.



³ Corey A. DeAngelis et al., *Charter School Funding: (More) Inequity in the City* (Fayetteville, AR: Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas, 2018), <http://www.uaedreform.org/downloads/2018/11/charter-school-funding-more-inequity-in-the-city.pdf>.

⁴ Nicole Acevado and the Associated Press, “Puerto Rico's former education secretary, others arrested in federal fraud probe,” NBC News, July 10, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/puerto-rico-s-former-education-secretary-others-arrested-federal-fraud-n1028251>.

Recruiting Families

Prior to Proyecto Vimenti’s launch, BGCPR held over 400 conversations with community residents. Ongoing recruitment efforts included distributing flyers at neighboring schools during arrivals and dismissals, open houses, public meetings, neighborhood meet-and-greets, street canvassing, vehicle audio messages, presentations at community-based organizations, and conversations with local officials—all in the local high-need community with Vimenti’s target population of educationally disadvantaged youth. As the first charter school on the island, Vimenti educates parents about its no-cost, public model and about parents’ continued rights to the school’s special education services, which they sometimes give up to attend private schools. The school is committed to ensuring that the community is aware of the opportunity at Vimenti for bilingual education with wrap-around social, emotional, and educational supports for students and families.

In its first year, Vimenti served students in kindergarten and first grade. In the second year it added second grade, and will add a grade every year through grade five, with two classes per grade. The school had rolling admissions in its first year and did not need to implement a lottery. In the second year they received around 66 applications for 39 spaces, so a lottery was implemented to determine admissions.

Early Operations and Lessons Learned

Funding partners: Proyecto Vimenti (the school and its associated programs) operates as a largely privately financed organization. Nearly half (47 percent) of the total budget comes from private foundations, nearly a third (30 percent) from corporate donations, nearly a fifth (18 percent) from government programs (Department of Education plus other public programs). The remainder comes from individual donations.

The funds received from the Department of Education for the Proyecto Vimenti charter school total only \$300,000 to 400,000—a tiny portion of the project’s \$4 million annual budget. The school is currently spending about \$15,000 per student, not including other programs, and is reimbursed at only \$3,200 per student. The per-pupil cost will diminish somewhat as the school grows each year (its current enrollment is just under 100 students; the school expects to enroll 160 students in its fourth year). But BGCPR expects to continue to heavily subsidize the school.



Fiscal controls: Torres is proud that his initial cash flow and budget projections were largely held at Year 1. However, as in any start-up project, unexpected expenses cropped up to support operations, maintenance, and equipment, plus other services—nursing, an additional security guard, cooks, and psychological services—deemed necessary to support the students.

Having an experienced finance director and enough time to plan the operations and fiscal aspects of the school were critical to that first year. As a small nonprofit run mainly by people with an education—not business—background, things could have gone off the rails quickly. Staff had to learn to work within budgets and record their expenses correctly. Torres says that more could have been done to train staff to do this, but he feels they are 80 percent “there.” Staff are very committed to running a professional and fiscally disciplined organization that uses data to inform internal improvement, funders, and government. They continue to work to best position the organization for strategic growth aligned to the mission.

Integrating the Community Early

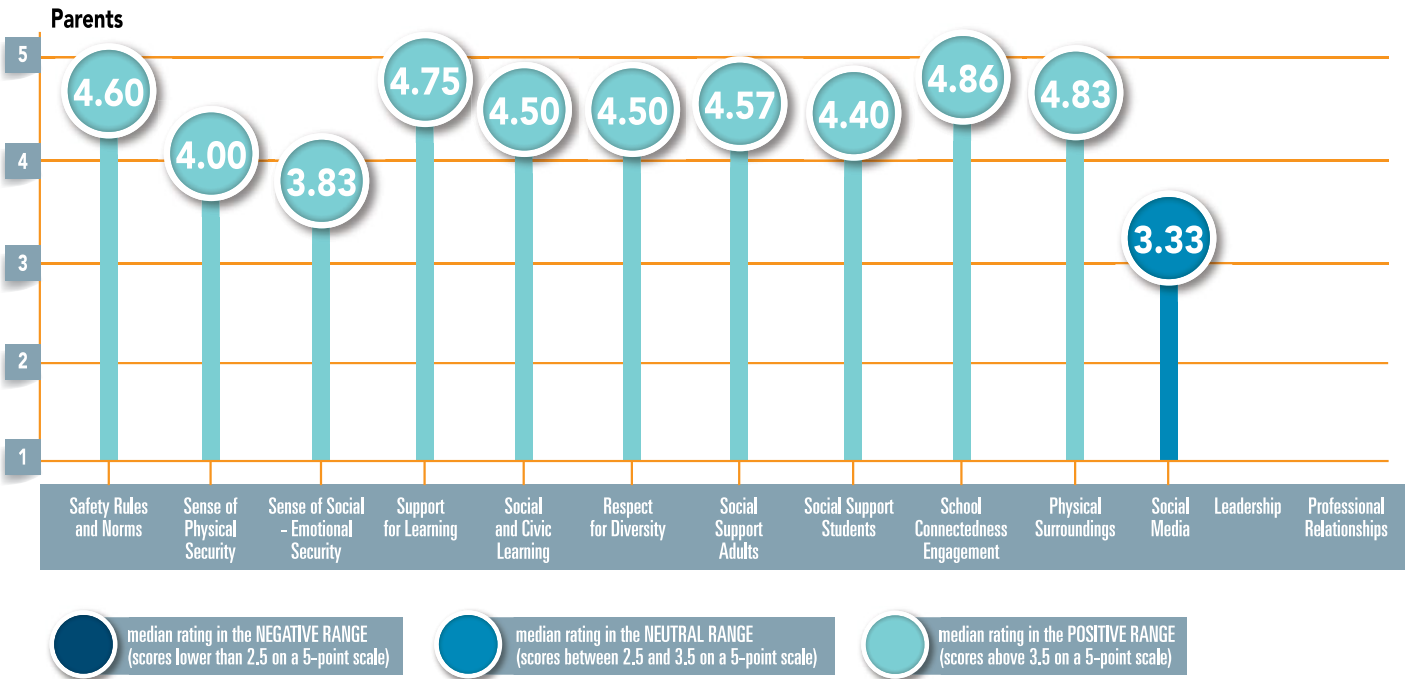
The decision to deeply engage the community in the design process seems to have paid off. Parents give Vimenti consistently high rankings on a school climate survey administered by the National Center on School Climate. The survey measured satisfaction on a five-point scale across domains such as school

safety, social supports and security, support for learning, connectedness and engagement, and respect for diversity. Parents gave an average ranking of 4 or better in all but two domains. Parents ranked “school connectedness and engagement” as well as “physical environment” highest at an average score of more than 4.8.

Our interviews with parents (described in more detail in the companion paper on student supports) also revealed high satisfaction and appreciation for both the core academic supports and the nontraditional elements of the school, especially student mental health and career support and training for families.



OVERALL PROFILE
School Climate Survey 2018-2019



Agility to Manage Change

Broader BGCPR management expertise and capacity has proved critical. Its governing board is legally responsible for the overall project, but the board voted to delegate most of its responsibility to the Vimenti school board, which oversees policy and tracks progress. The law allows only nonprofits to apply to become an Alliance charter school; the reality is that it is very difficult for anyone but established non-governmental organizations to do this.

Hernández Pérez, Secretary of Education, described to us what he referred to as “an impressive and very exhaustive workload” for Vimenti, just based on Department of Education requirements. As an Alliance school, Vimenti must file the same reports as other Puerto Rican public schools, including teacher attendance, quarterly grade reports and student promotion data, use of funds, and federal reporting requirements. In addition, at the end of each year Department of Education officials visit the school and review student performance data, the professional development of teachers, and relationships with families. Needless to say, managing those requirements is time consuming for the school.

What’s more, the complicated model—with its three interacting academic, social, and economic pillars—requires a hierarchical organization, with directors for each of the pillars. But Vimenti also employs a horizontal and participatory model of communication. Teacher and parent representatives are on the board and working committees to address particular issues.

Bárbara Rivera, Proyecto Vimenti’s director, provided critical guidance during what was at times a tumultuous start-up phase. Rivera sees her job as inspiring the leaders of the organization and connecting them with the mission. She says,

“Every day you have to keep the team connected to the mission because it is definitely not simple... I feel like a facilitator, removing obstacles that one is discovering along the way... We have to stay focused on what the plans are, on what the strategy is.”

The political context has also been challenging. No organized opposition to the school emerged until the charter was announced. Union opposition was likely tied to mainland opposition to nonunionized charter schools, but local context also played a role. Puerto Rican government bankruptcy led labor unions—not just the teachers union—to see education as the first frontier for privatization. Carrera said,

“We have been the poster child for the opposition.”

In response, the leadership team focused on transparency and on communicating why they were doing the work. They held two press conferences. They publicly present processes and results twice per year and talk about things that worked and those that didn’t. Everyone interviewed for these papers, for example, were open about the early challenges, as well as successes. Carrera believes this openness has allowed them to present a different face than what people expected.

Looking Forward

The financial, organizational, and personal commitment to this project have been immense and will continue for some time, if not indefinitely. The Proyecto Vimenti team implemented a very complex project, organizationally and financially. A priority moving forward is to continue to improve data management and organizational changes based on evidence of what works. The school is also looking to improve parent integration in its governance, committees, and instructional approach. While parents are thankful and happy with the services, Vimenti leaders believe it is necessary to better integrate them in its governance and academic approach.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Puerto Rico will continue its financial support through the pilot period, but replicability (should the model prove successful) will rely on a greater level of public support. “We will be there for the kids,” Eric Torres explains, “but the

state needs to commit more resources. Funding is still not representative of the law.” He adds, “Frankly, I don’t see how other organizations can get into the charter school model. The numbers don’t balance. \$3,200 [per student] is nothing. The business model is impossible. Who is going to support them?”

And yet, no one we spoke with, from funders to the founding team, regrets the mission or has any doubts about continued commitment to the mission. When asked if it has been worth it, Carrera responded,

“Definitely. Yes. Puerto Rico needs 20 to 30 high-performing schools to create a tipping point. We are holding ourselves responsible for quality. For the benefit of all children in Puerto Rico, we need to show what is possible. We want to be the first to the dance floor. But hope others will want to join us.”

SCHOOL SERVICES



